

# Visual Analysis Toolkit: Four Use Cases

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**Abstract:** This poster provides four visual analyses of videogames with a focus on the structures of semiotic resources based on tools developed by the Authors in order to establish a methodology for exploring how we create meaning around the practice of gaming. Using several perspectives, including the relationship between “noticings” and orientational elements, visual conventions within and beyond games, and ideological frameworks to explore various videogames, this poster both uses the visual analysis tools as well as critiques the applicability of these tools to further an emerging discussion about how we create and share meaning in and around videogames.

Using the visual analysis toolkit also included in these proceedings (Holmes, 2013), this paper provides four use cases that demonstrate a variety of applications and frames for conducting visual analysis around videogames. These frames include the orientational elements and “noticings”, structures and conventions of games and other media, and ideological lenses. By providing multiple applications of the tools, we seek to both utilize and refine these approaches across different genres and use environments. For designers, understanding the various conceptual conventions and semiotic resources available to them can help drive more effective design. For players, understanding the ways in which designers intend meaning as well as the ideological frameworks they bring to a game enables a deeper interrogation of their play and a stronger reflection on the choices they make and the actions they perform in their play. Meaning making occurs across many modes, from kinesthetic feedback to textual interfaces to aural cues to the mechanics of the game itself. As a dominantly visual medium, however, videogames offer a particularly rich space for discussing the various methods for creating and negotiating meaning. Creating a more robust framework for analyzing the resources used to make sense of the game and how these prepare players for the actions of play opens new avenues of analysis and critique as well as new discussions on how to best create and experience games more broadly. Finally, limiting this analysis to visual semiotics both focuses the research and provides insight into an as-yet underserved area of research and application.

## **Use Case 1: Point of view and salience as structural elements in *Shadow of the Colossus***

This use case explores the structures and conventions of point-of-view and salience in *Shadow of the Colossus*. These features help orient the player to the game and the interfaces, instruct and guide them in engaging with the mechanics of the game, as well as point to the larger narrative and ideological frames. The game employs a third-person perspective that shifts based on the context of the current actions; scaling the massive colossi often centers the camera not on the player but on the colossi themselves, and pulls the camera back to a “far distant” view; when the player aims their bow the camera shifts to an over-the-shoulder view and close distance. This changing view ties directly to what the player is doing (climbing the colossus, shooting their bow) and helps accommodate those actions. It also demonstrates the scale of the colossi in contrast to the increasingly small and hapless player-character, tying the player to the story of the game and the ethics of your actions. Salience—how elements are foregrounded or backgrounded—similarly supports both a player’s actions and the stories of the world. Elements of the interface, light and shadow, color, and size all work to direct the player’s attention to objects to interact with and actions to take. They also point towards what is important or necessary to understand about the gameworld itself. Together, these structural elements help players know how to play the game as well as how to frame the contexts of their actions within the game’s narrative conceit.

## **Use Case 2: Color as a videogame convention**

Color palettes are an integral aspect of aesthetic, narrative tone, and audience positioning across media types. In games, color also helps players recognize not just how to feel and but also how to act. This use case examines color in *BioShock Infinite* (2013), *Dishonored* (2012), and *Dear Esther* (2012) to first assess the semiotics of color as a convention unique to videogames, drawing on Kress and Leeuwen (2002), and then to critique games against color conventions of mainstream media and advertising. By assessing color in terms of its use in games as a unique convention, this use case further focuses on color as an important factor in determining player action, where particular tones and palette choices can help users assess their position and status in the gameworld (e.g. ‘safe’ versus ‘in danger’) as well as the ideological framework of the gameworld and narrative (e.g. ‘good’ versus

'bad'). The strength of color to convey and inspire these emotions and actions provides a growing space for developers to experiment with the juxtaposition of color and ideology as a means of inspiring complex emotions in the player (such as betrayal, fear, or victory) by affirming, reifying or subverting common game-based color conventions.

### **Use Case 3: Designer choices and ideological frames in *Game Dev Tycoon***

The visual analysis toolkit provides one methodology for examining a designer's ideological frames by focusing on the choices they made in creating and using visual representations within the game. This analysis uses *Game Dev Tycoon* (2013) to understand the designer's ideological claim about how games are made and what effects piracy has on that practice, with an emphasis on the differences between a legitimately purchased version of the game and a pirated copy (which the developers distributed themselves). Making a profit is a central premise of the game. Representational cues highlight this premise: widgets appear on the right-hand side which shows cash on-hand, cashflow and sales, promotions and other economic metrics. Other menu items like hiring employees and game updates also demonstrate this ethic; so does the progress of the player's company, which expands its physical space and its staff. The pirated copy of the game includes mechanical penalties like low cashflow and prevents the player from "beating" the game; it also indicates to players that their fictional game is suffering due to high piracy rates. The designers could have chosen to simply put a message at the beginning of the game to express their disapproval of the game piracy practice, but according to designer Patrick Klug (2013), they "didn't want to pass up the unique opportunity of holding a mirror in front of them and showing them what piracy can do to game developers". These representational choices illustrate the worldview of the game's makers and indicate their assumptions about the game development industry.

### **Use Case 4: Outside the game representations and preparation for action**

Applying the visual analysis toolkit beyond the on-screen representations to include "gaming adjacent" representations like marketing materials and other media provides insight into the relationship between representation and play. This use case examines the box art of several Mario games, which almost invariably demonstrate the new tools and significant changes to the game space. These changes occur over time between generations of hardware and across other Mario games. The box art can be seen as a way to "prime" players for the different experience and different mechanics offered in each game. The box art generally depicts Mario with a new ability he will have during that game. For example, *Super Mario Brothers* (1985) shows him with the fire flower power up (a new ability for Mario from his previous incarnations); *Super Mario World* (1990) shows him riding Yoshi wearing a cape (both a new character as well as a new ability); *Super Mario 64* (1996) shows him flying with the Wing Cap (another new tool), and *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002) shows him with the water backpack, F.L.U.D.D. Showing the player the tools of Mario uses in the particular game on the box art orients the player to what mechanics are new in the game and what is available to them to complete the characters goals. Similarly, the box art often tells the player how Mario's world changed from game to game. For example, the change from a 2D to the 3D space is depicted in *Super Mario 64* by the emphasis on the depth of the 3D world and Mario flying over the title of the game. The world is generally only represented on the box art when the world itself changes; otherwise, the focus is almost exclusively on the character of Mario. This use case primarily shows how representations can prepare players to play and make sense of the context for their play.

## **References**

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